

Washington, DC— With the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) threatening to end a school lunch pilot program that has effectively provided thousands of economically disadvantaged students in Philadelphia with free, nutritious meals, Congressman Joe Sestak (PA-07) submitted the School Meal Enhancement Act to make the program's benefits available permanently across the country. The pilot, administered by the School District of Philadelphia (SDOP) since 1991, replaces the normal practice of requiring applications to be filled out, returned, and processed to determine eligibility for free or reduced price lunches. Instead, a socio-demographic survey establishes the approximate eligibility rates at select schools where a large percentage of the students would be eligible.

Like the SDOP program, this legislation offers school districts nation-wide the opportunity to use methods established by the USDA to determine estimated eligibility rates. If 65 percent of students at a school are eligible for free meals or 75 percent for free or reduced price meals, the district can choose to offer free meals to all students, receive reimbursement at the estimated eligibility rates and eliminate the processing of paper applications.

"As the USDA acknowledged when it began the Philadelphia pilot, not all students, especially those from economically challenged families, return take-home forms, which would otherwise be required to obtain free lunches," said Congressman Sestak. "Other eligible students do not participate because of the stigma attached to receiving a free lunch, while a friend and fellow classmate pays. This legislation will remove the economic and administrative burden of paper applications on districts in poor areas and put in place a proven, efficient method of providing nutritious meals to those young people most at risk."

The SDOP pilot has shown that the net cost to the school district of such a program is negligible. Although the district must pay for the survey and non-reimbursed meals, that expense is offset by the savings from ending the paper application process. Additionally, districts can reduce the cost of lunch per student by, building upon economies of scale, expanding the number of students eating school meals. Any increase in cost to the USDA is only due to the system being more effective at covering more eligible students, a demonstration of success for the program.

The Congressman has worked for the last year to at least delay the USDA's proposal to end the Philadelphia program following the 2009-2010 school year. In June 2008, he wrote to then-Secretary of Agriculture Edward Shafer, and expressed interest in the Universal Feeding pilot program that provides free lunches to all students in more than 100 of the District's schools. The Secretary responded that the Department did not intend to continue to allow the SDOP to utilize its alternative approach.

As the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PADED) has pointed out, “elimination of the Universal Feeding program in the School District of Philadelphia will not benefit USDA, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, or the city of Philadelphia, but most of all, it will not benefit the children who depend upon the school district as the source, and sometimes their only source, of one of the basic necessities of life, which is food.” The Congressman’s support of the Philadelphia program and opposition to the USDA decision led to the drafting of legislation.

“At a time when more than 16 percent of our children are obese and almost 78,000 children in Philadelphia alone live in households that do not provide them with access to enough food for an active and healthy lifestyle, I feel it essential to build on programs like the one in Philadelphia, not eliminate them,” said Congressman Sestak. “The USDA has reasoned that it is unfair for Philadelphia to use its approach when other districts do not have that option. Congress has the opportunity to act to preserve and expand this important program.”

*Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, Joe was the first Director of “Deep Blue,” the Navy’s anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the “Global War on Terrorism.” He served as President Clinton’s Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Joe is the highest-ranking former military officer ever elected to the U.S. Congress.*

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